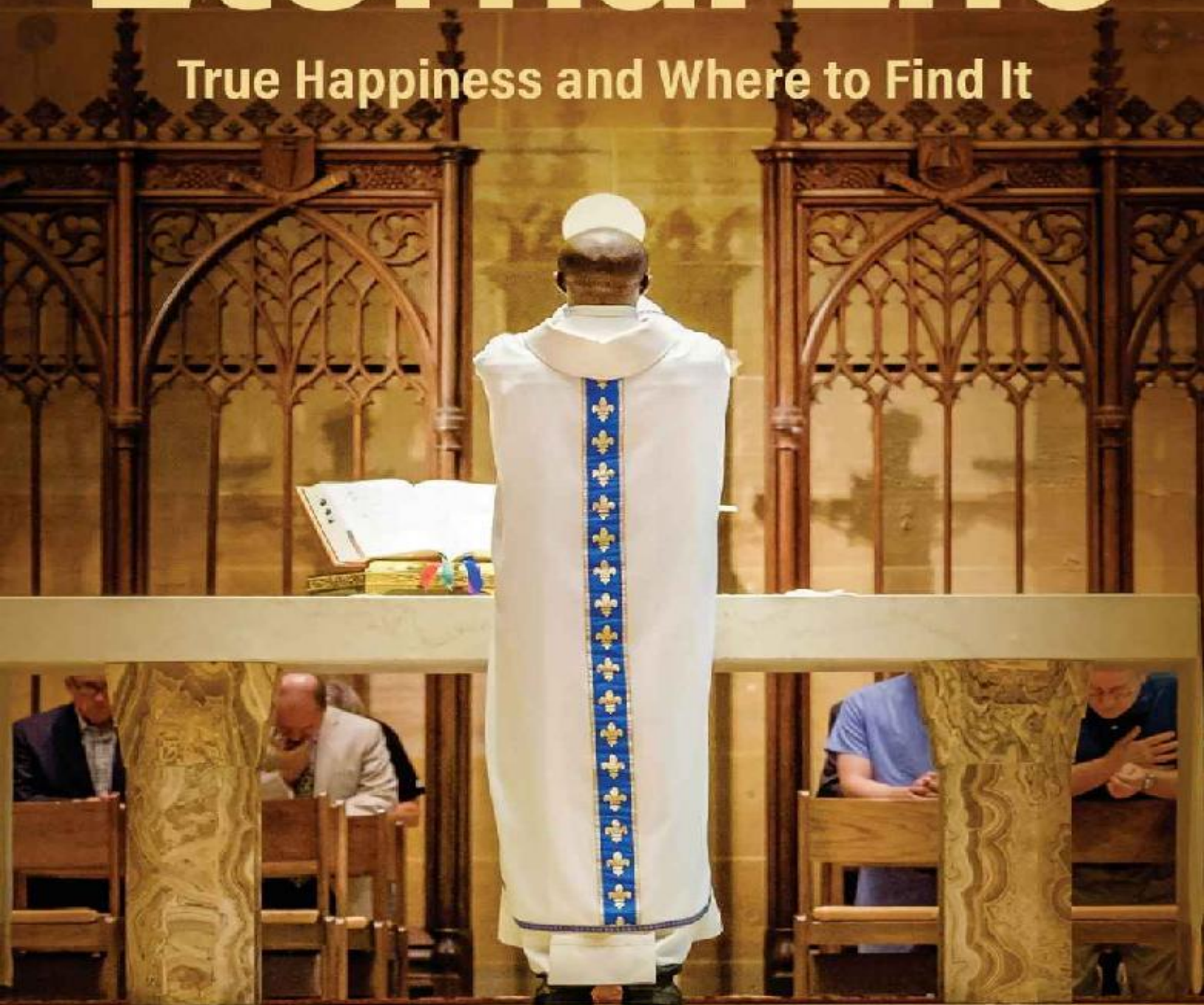


The Words of Eternal Life

True Happiness and Where to Find It



Jimmy Akin

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TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

All of us want to be happy. No matter who we are or where we're from, we all share that desire for happiness.

Some things make us happy for a short time, like food, fun, and being with friends. But these pleasures come and go. Many are able to find longer-term happiness with family, but families also come with disappointment and hardship.

And ultimately, all of us are confronted with an inescapable reality—we're all going to die.

When we contemplate the end of our lives, we must ask serious questions. Is there nothing more? Is life, as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* said, just a tale "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"?

Two thousand years ago, the most influential man in history preached good news to the people: by embracing God—the source of all happiness—we can find true, perfect happiness that doesn't end.

But God is infinitely above us. He is all-knowing and all-wise. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9). Thus, God sometimes tells us things that go beyond all human expectation.

Sometimes people struggled with lessons Jesus taught, finding them to be "hard sayings" (John 6:60). When some even abandoned him because of these teachings, Jesus turned to his core disciples and asked, "Do you also wish to go away?" (John 6:67).

St. Peter spoke up and said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

This is exactly right. There is nowhere else to go. Jesus has the words that bring the happiness of eternal life.

Since that day, billions of people around the world have heeded Jesus' message. They have found the happiness and life that only Jesus can give. But many others are still seeking it. Perhaps that includes you.

Perhaps you are one of the many who has never heard Jesus' message.

Perhaps you have never seen the evidence that shows why it's true.

Perhaps you have forgotten his message and need a reminder of how important it is.

Or perhaps you have found that happiness and want an even deeper experience.

Whatever the case, this book is for you. In it, we'll look at Jesus' words, why we can have confidence that they are true, and how we can gain true and lasting happiness from them.

Jesus came to bring us the words of eternal life. And now we have them.

1. Everything Starts with God

Today we live in a skeptical age, and some ask why we should believe in God at all.

Part of the answer is that it's built into our nature. Religion is a human universal. It appears in every culture, through the entire history of the world.

Human Nature as a Clue

The two fundamental ideas in religion are the divine (God or the gods) and the afterlife. Every religion has teachings about one or both of these. There never has been a people that disbelieved in the divine and the afterlife. Not even in the twentieth century, when some totalitarian regimes tried to ban religion (it didn't work). Religion is built into our nature. To "be religious" is simply to fulfill your human nature rather than resisting or ignoring it.

This is an important clue to the nature of reality. British author C.S. Lewis wrote:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.¹

The twin desires for the divine and the afterlife, which appear in every time and land, are powerful pointers to their reality. There really is a God, and the human desire for him is so strong that, if denied knowledge of the true God, people will invent new ones to fill the gap. The desire to be with him is so strong that people recognize it can't be satisfied in this life—pointing to life after death.

"In the Beginning"

We can say more about God's existence. Some scholars have proposed an

argument based on the fact that things have beginnings. Whether it's a cloud, a rock, or a baby, everything in the universe has a beginning.

We perceive that these things didn't come out of nowhere. There were reasons why they came to be. Evaporating water forms clouds. Lava cools to make rocks. And, of course, a baby has parents. Not only does everything in the universe have a beginning, there is a reason why it began.

We call these reasons "causes," and the quest to understand causes is one of the main goals of science. Scientists have discovered causes for many of the phenomena in nature, but the overall guiding principle is the powerful human intuition that things have causes. When something begins to exist, there is a reason why.

Some thinkers have used this fact to argue for God's existence like this:

1. Everything that has a beginning has a cause.
2. The universe has a beginning.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.
4. "The cause of the universe" is a basic definition of God.
5. Therefore, God exists.

Sometimes people respond by asking, "If everything has a cause, what caused God?" But this is a misunderstanding. The argument doesn't claim that *everything* has a cause, but only that everything *that has a beginning* has a cause. If something doesn't have a beginning, it doesn't need a cause.

The idea that God is *eternal* and so has no beginning is an important part of all the world's monotheistic religions. Christians follow the words of the Bible, which teaches, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). If God himself didn't have a beginning, then we don't need to ask what caused him.

Does the argument for God's existence work?

The first premise—that everything with a beginning has a cause—is a truth we can readily observe, a fact that drives scientific inquiry.

Another premise—that being the cause of the universe is a basic definition

of God—is simply a definition, and so it doesn’t need to be proved any more than definitions like “a bachelor is an unmarried man” or “a triangle has three angles.” These are all true by definition.

Of course, a single argument can only do so much. But if it’s true that the world has a cause, then it’s legitimate to understand that cause as God, whatever else he may be. So the question at that point would not be, “Does God exist?” but “What *kind* of God exists?” To build a full picture of God, this argument would need to be supplemented with others to reveal more aspects of his character.

The key part of this argument is the second premise—that the world has a beginning. If that’s true, everything else follows. Do we have evidence of such a beginning? Yes, and we’ve had it for a *long* time.

The Night Sky

Suppose the universe did *not* have a beginning but instead stretched infinitely far back in time. What would the results be? The night sky gives us a clue.

When we look up on a clear, moonless night, we see a sky filled with stars. And the deeper into space we look, the more stars and galaxies we see. We’re surrounded by a sea of innumerable stars.

Astronomers once thought that the universe was infinitely old, with an infinite number of stars on all sides of us.

So, why is the night sky dark?

Think about it: if the universe always existed, light from even very distant stars should have reached us by now. The light from *every* star in the heavens should have reached us after infinite time. And since we’re surrounded by them, the whole sky should be blazing with light from all those countless stars. We should look up, even at night, and see a wall of light that is bright like the face of the sun.

But that’s not what we see, and it’s a clue that the universe is *not* infinitely old but had a beginning.

People wondered about the problem of the night sky for centuries. One was the German astronomer Heinrich Olbers (1758–1840), and scientists

often called the darkness of the night sky “Olbers’s paradox.” Those who held that the universe had no beginning found it hard to resolve the paradox, and in 1927 it became even harder when the Belgian astronomer and priest Fr. Georges Lemaître realized that Einstein’s theory of general relativity suggested that the universe should be expanding, which meant it would have a beginning. At some point in the past, everything would have been compressed into a “cosmic egg,” as Lemaître put it. This material then expanded outward to form the universe as we see it. The Big Bang theory was born!

Soon it was confirmed. Using new telescopes and tools, astronomers began to measure the light from distant galaxies and discovered they were moving away from us. What’s more, the farther away the galaxies were, the faster they were moving away. The whole universe was expanding! More confirmations of the Big Bang followed, and today it is the accepted view in astronomy.

In 1951, Pope Pius XII hailed these discoveries:

It would seem that present-day science, with one sweeping step back across millions of centuries, has succeeded in bearing witness to that primordial “*Fiat lux*” [Latin, “Let there be light”] uttered at the moment when, along with matter, there burst forth from nothing a sea of light and radiation, while the particles of chemical elements split and formed into millions of galaxies.²

Science had discovered that the universe had a beginning, and thus a cause, meaning that God exists.

Why Does Anything Exist at All?

The results of science are always provisional, so they can change as new evidence is discovered. We thus shouldn’t rest our faith simply on what today’s science suggests.

We should ask more fundamental questions, like whether we can show that God exists in a way that doesn’t depend on changing scientific ideas. That puts us in the realm of philosophy, which deals with fundamental

truths that don't change.

Many philosophical proofs of God's existence have been offered, and some are quite complex. Here we will look at a simple one that is easier to understand. It begins with the question, "Why does anything exist at all?" (This is another expression of the powerful human intuition to understand causes.)

When we look at the world around us, we see many things that change. For example, at one time a man may be standing, but at another time he may be sitting. Yet he is the same man. Philosophers express this fact by saying that the man's posture is *contingent*, meaning that it could be different than it is. Humans are "contingent beings," because they could be different than they are at any given moment.

The same is true of everything we see in the universe. Living things like people, animals, and plants all grow and develop. Inanimate things like your car, phone, or computer may be turned on or off. Even rocks and gems can be cut, polished, or moved from one place to another. All the things in the physical world are contingent: they could be different than they are.

But is everything contingent? Let's consider a man who is standing. Why is he standing *now*?

This question can be answered in different ways. You might appeal to something in the future (he's standing to reach something on a shelf) or to something in the past (he just got out of bed), but we're not interested in these. Forget the past and the future and focus only on the present moment. Why is he standing *right now*?

You could say, "Well, he's tensing certain muscles in his body to stand." True! But we can go even deeper. On a more basic level, there are chemical and electrical processes in his cells that cause the right muscles to tense. And we can go further yet, down to the level of atoms and the particles they are made of. If we wanted, we could explain why the man is standing in terms of the positions of all the particles in his body and the forces governing how they interact.

This is the deepest kind of explanation science currently can provide, but we can ask still-deeper questions: why do these particles exist at all? Why

don't they just disappear?

Scientists have proposed principles dealing with the conservation of mass and energy to explain why the atoms in the man's body continue to exist. They've also proposed forces that govern the interactions of the particles in the atoms. Currently, there are four known forces: gravity, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces. These forces obey rules or laws of their own.

But our curiosity still isn't satisfied. Why do principles like the conservation of mass and energy hold? Why are there four fundamental forces? Why do they obey certain laws and not others?

One day, it may be possible to explain the current laws of physics in terms of a deeper, more fundamental set of laws. But this would only push the question back one level, because we'd need to ask the same questions about any newer, deeper principles. Why are *they* the way they are and not some other way?

At some point, we must hit a fundamental explanation for why things are the way they are, one where it no longer makes sense to ask, "Why is it this way rather than another way?" It would not be an explanation that is *contingent* but one that is *necessary*—something that *couldn't* be different than it is. And the first and necessary explanation for why things are the way they are is a basic definition of God.

The alternative would be to say that there is an *infinite regress* of explanations, with each level needing to be explained by something deeper without end. For some, this might seem an appealingly poetic idea, but there are problems with it.

First, we have no evidence for an infinite regress of explanations. We should not invent a complicated answer to this question when a simpler one fits the evidence better.

Another problem with the idea of an infinite regress is that, in the end, it wouldn't explain anything. It doesn't provide an answer to why anything exists at all—it just pushes the question back forever. The whole universe would thus be left unexplained.

Remember that not *everything* needs a cause or explanation. Only things

that are contingent—things that could be other than they are, like a man who could stand or sit—do. Everything we see in the physical world is contingent, so to explain why these things exist we need not another contingent thing but a *necessary* one—something that simply *must* exist.

That something is God. By definition, God does not need a cause or explanation. He is the First Cause and Ultimate Explanation.

What else can we learn about God?

The Christian View of God

No single argument tells us everything about God, but as we consider different ones we get new parts of the picture.

The first argument we considered—that human nature has an inbuilt desire for relationship with the divine that can't be satisfied in this life—points to a God who is capable of having relationships. So he can't be merely an impersonal force with no mind or will. It also points to him being supremely intelligent, capable of having relationships with the vast number of people who exist.

The second argument—that the beginning of the universe shows the existence of God—reveals that he is immensely powerful, for he brought the whole universe into being.

And the third argument—that God is the ultimate explanation for why the universe is the way it is *right now*—points to the fact that he still exists and that he could not be other than he is, for he is a necessary Being.

We thus build up a picture of God as an all-knowing (*omniscient*), all-powerful (*omnipotent*), all-loving (*omnibenevolent*) and necessary Being who cares for his creatures and enters into relationships with them.

Philosophers and theologians have developed arguments that further flesh out our understanding of God. Among them is the idea that God doesn't just have perfect knowledge, perfect power, and perfect love—he has *all possible* perfections. Whatever perfections are possible, God has all of them in an infinite degree, including the infinite happiness that he has always possessed in heaven.

Such an omniperfect Being has no needs. We have a need for God to

create us and sustain us in existence; but God has no need of anyone to create him. He has no cause. We have an inborn need for union with God; but God does not need union with us. He is already infinitely happy and doesn't need our worship or our prayers.

Consequently, God didn't *have* to create the world. His infinite happiness is part of who he is, and he would have been just as happy if he never created anything. So, why did he? The answer is that he didn't do it for himself. He did it for us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), an official book of Catholic teaching, explains:

We believe that God created the world according to his wisdom. It is not the product of any necessity whatever, nor of blind fate or chance. We believe that it proceeds from God's free will; he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom, and goodness (295).

The infinite, all-loving God thus freely chose to create the world and everything in it, including us, that he might share his love and goodness with us. And his love for us does not stop with the mere fact of creation.

2. God Gives Us the Words of Eternal Life

The desire for God and eternal happiness is with us throughout life, but our awareness of it goes through cycles. The things of the world can distract us, and some people spend years or even their whole lives trying to find happiness away from God.

At some point in life, though, we all become aware of our need for God and the fact that we aren't self-sufficient. It may be a time of joy—like the birth of a child. It may be a time of crisis—the loss of a job, a family tragedy, a health crisis, or mental illness. It could be the emptiness we feel when we realize that worldly pleasures aren't ultimately satisfying. Or it may be the approach of our death.

In such times we may realize how small and limited we are and long to cry out to One greater than ourselves.

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created

by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for (CCC 27).

How can we find God and the happiness he offers?

Reason

One way is by using the gift of reason that God has given us. Earlier we saw how philosophers and theologians have found many ingenious ways to think and learn about him.

The Bible affirms that reason can help people anywhere learn about God. When St. Paul visited Athens, he discussed and even quoted Greek thinkers who had discovered parts of the truth:

[God] made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth . . . that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring” (Acts 17:26–28).

Elsewhere, Paul notes that men can discover facts about God by reasoning from the created world:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made (Rom. 1:19–20).

Reason is a useful tool, but it also has limits. Not everyone is a philosopher or theologian, and complex lines of reasoning can be difficult to follow.

Further, God is infinite, so he vastly exceeds what the human mind can comprehend. Even the most brilliant thinkers can only probe a tiny portion of his infinite mystery.

Finally, our reason is darkened by sin. We have disordered desires, and

because of temptation, it is easy to rationalize them. We tell ourselves things like, “Would this *really* be so bad?”, “It won’t *hurt* anybody,” or, “God won’t *mind* if I do this.”

Using such rationalizations, we talk ourselves out of what reason and our consciences tell us. “So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful” (CCC 37).

Faced with these limits, fallen human reason can only do so much. It would help if God gave us a clear statement of the truth. Fortunately, he has done that.

The Word of God

God also reveals the truth to us directly—by “the word of God”:

Man’s faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith. The proofs of God’s existence, however, can predispose one to faith and help one to see that faith is not opposed to reason (CCC 35).

God’s word helps overcome the limitations of human reason:

This is why man stands in need of being enlightened by God’s revelation, not only about those things that exceed his understanding, but also about those religious and moral truths which of themselves are not beyond the grasp of human reason, so that even in the present condition of the human race, they can be known by all men with ease, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error (CCC 38).

This direct *revelation* from God allows us to know things we either couldn’t know or could know only with difficulty: truths about God himself, about the future, and about what happens after death. God’s word includes a clear expression of his will and how we can find true happiness. It makes it easier to resist temptation and dismiss our easy rationalizations.

God has given us the words of eternal life from the start:

Wishing to open up the way to heavenly salvation, he manifested himself to our first parents from the very beginning. He invited them to intimate communion with himself and clothed them with resplendent grace and justice.

This revelation was not broken off by our first parents' sin. After the fall, God buoyed them up with the hope of salvation, by promising redemption; and he has never ceased to show his solicitude for the human race. For he wishes to give eternal life to all those who seek salvation by patience in well-doing (CCC 54–55).

But *how* has God done this?

Tradition

The ability to talk is built into human nature, but this is not the case with writing. There was an age before writing was invented. We don't know the exact date when writing began, but it was shortly before 3000 B.C. Archaeologists have discovered a trove of drawings, artifacts, and inscriptions that reveal its history.

Because writing took time to develop, God originally revealed his word in oral form. He spoke to a patriarch or a prophet, and that person related to others what God said. We see many examples of this in the Bible, and there is a term for passing on information this way: oral *tradition*.

Any time information is passed from one person to another, it is an example of tradition. The word comes from the Latin root *tradere*, which means to hand over or to pass on. Because our culture today is highly literate, we focus on information being passed down in written form—in written tradition—and we often overlook how it has been passed down orally in many other cultures in history.

This was the way most people got their information in the ancient world, and it worked well. From one generation to another, people would orally pass on needed information—about their history, their land, their skills. The method worked so well that writing didn't have to be invented for

thousands of years, and it's why writing didn't catch on everywhere all at once.

Oral tradition was the original way God's word was passed down. By it, he communicated and preserved his revelation to humanity through the long centuries before the first line of Scripture was written.

Scripture

Eventually, God's people Israel entered a new phase of history and began to produce written works.

Their neighbors had been doing this for some time. The Babylonians and the Egyptians were the first peoples to develop systems of writing, between about 3300 B.C. and 3100 B.C. However, oral tradition worked so well that most peoples—including the Hebrews—did not adopt writing immediately.

The earliest Hebrew writings come from around 1000 B.C., about the time of King David. This shows just how effective oral tradition was in sustaining the faith of God's people and preserving knowledge of his word.

When the Israelites began to write, God used this to share his word, too. His Holy Spirit began inspiring human authors, including prophets, to present his word in writing. Later, these works came to be called *scriptura sacra* (Latin, "the holy writings"), from which we get the modern word *Scripture*. Eventually, they were printed in a single volume known as the Bible.

The story of how God gave us these writings and how they came to be bound together in the Bible is fascinating.³ Over centuries, God inspired dozens of books, in languages like Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, to give his word to his people.

Progressive Revelation

As he did so, God gave the Israelites progressively more information about himself and his will. Through time, he trained them to understand him better and better, the way a parent trains a child through different stages of growth and maturity.

At first, God tolerated how the Israelites were still very influenced by ideas in the ancient world that didn't reflect his will. Thus, Jesus said Moses

allowed the Israelites to continue in certain practices—like divorce and remarriage—because of their “hardness of heart” (Matt. 19:8). The first Israelites weren’t prepared to give up these practices and would have turned their backs on God.

But in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus Christ—his divine Son and the Word of God in human form (cf. John 1:1, 14)—who gave the full and final revelation of God’s will to mankind. This revelation surpassed that of all the prophets who had come before.

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb. 1:1–3).

Now God had spoken to man in a new and definitive way. And notice how he did it!

Tradition . . . and Scripture

Some Christians believe that we should ignore the oral tradition God used to communicate his word and focus only on what is written in Scripture. They hold that we should believe and observe Christian doctrine based on “Scripture alone” (Latin, *sola scriptura*).

Yet this is not what we see in Scripture. In the Old Testament, the word of God continued to be passed down through oral preaching, including by prophets who never wrote books. Tradition and Scripture continued alongside each other, and both were authoritative. It didn’t matter *how* the word of God reached you. The fact that it *was* God’s word made it authoritative.

We see the same in the New Testament. When Jesus gave us God’s definitive word, he didn’t do so by writing a book but through oral preaching, and all the new things he taught were authoritative, despite not being written down.

Jesus didn’t command his followers to write books, and it was years before that began to happen. Yet from the very beginning all the new

teachings of the Christian faith were authoritative, though they were known only by oral Tradition.

By the time the books of the New Testament began to be written, about A.D. 50, we find the inspired authors upholding the authority of Tradition. Paul says,

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thess. 2:15).

He considered the oral traditions he delivered to be authoritative, and failing to keep them was grounds for exclusion:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us (2 Thess. 3:6).

And he commended Christians who kept the traditions as they had been delivered:

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you (1 Cor. 11:2).

We don't see the authors of the New Testament teaching the *sola scriptura* or "Bible only" view. They understood God's word to be authoritative regardless of whether it was passed down as oral or written tradition.

Of course, it's possible to claim that things should be different today. "Maybe the apostles didn't practice *sola scriptura*, but *we* should." Here we encounter a problem, because if it were true that *all* doctrines need to be proved by Scripture alone, we would need to prove *sola scriptura* this way. Otherwise, it will fail its own test.

So, if the first Christians weren't supposed to use *sola scriptura* but *we* are supposed to use it today, we'll need to find passages showing there is to be such a major shift once the apostles are gone.

We would need to find passages saying things like, "We apostles have made a pact to ensure that all the authoritative traditions get written down before we die, so after that only the written word will be authoritative," or,

“Although we’re orally teaching you some things that are authoritative *now*, they’ll lose their authority once we’re dead.”

However, no verses in the New Testament say or imply anything like this. Its authors barely discuss the post-apostolic age, and when they do, they don’t envision a shift in how Christians are supposed to get their doctrine. Quite the contrary!

Paul wrote the biblical letter 2 Timothy as he saw his death approaching: “I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come” (2 Tim. 4:6). It is one of the few places a New Testament author discusses what to do after his death, and far from indicating there will be a change in how Christians get doctrine, he emphasizes the continuing role of oral tradition, telling his protégé Timothy:

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim. 2:1–2).

Paul names four generations in the chain of Christian Tradition:

1. His generation, where the Tradition originated;
2. Timothy’s generation, which received it from the apostles;
3. the generation Timothy will teach; and
4. the generation they will teach.

He thus envisions apostolic Tradition continuing to be passed down in the post-apostolic age. He doesn’t say, “Forget everything that isn’t written once I’m dead and focus on the Bible alone.”

Sola scriptura turns out to be a self-refuting doctrine that fails its own test. It cannot be proved “by Scripture alone.” The biblical authors envisioned Tradition, as well as Scripture, continuing to be authoritative.

And there is another element that we need to consider.

Church Teaching Authority

As the Son of God, Jesus had authority to teach God’s word, and the crowds

“were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority” (Mark 1:22).

The twelve disciples were Jesus’ students (that’s what *disciple* means), and he gave them authority to teach in his name:

These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matt. 10:5–7).

Later, when sending out a larger group, he underlined the teaching authority he gave them, saying,

He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Luke 10:16).

As the Church grew, teaching authority was transmitted to others. As Paul writes, “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers” (1 Cor. 12:28; cf. Eph. 4:11). Because of this teaching function, the Church is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

The Latin word for teacher is *magister*, and so the teaching authority Jesus gave his Church is called the *Magisterium*. Originally, it was held by the apostles, but when they passed from the scene, it was inherited by their successors, the bishops (CCC 77).

The Magisterium does not receive any new revelation from God. New public revelation of God’s word ended with the apostolic age. Instead, its function is to ensure that we interpret God’s word correctly, which isn’t always easy. Even St. Peter could speak of Paul’s writings and say,

Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures (2 Pet. 3:15–16).

To keep people from twisting God’s word to their destruction, the Holy

Spirit established the precedent of consulting the Magisterium. We see this in Acts 15, when a controversy arose. Since the original Christians were Jews, some assumed you needed to become a Jew to be saved. Gentiles (non-Jews) thus needed to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses.

But this wasn't true, as God had made clear. Samaritans, for instance, had become Christians and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:4–8, 14–17). Under the guidance of the Spirit, Philip the Evangelist baptized an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27–39). And God gave Peter a revelation telling him to receive the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius into the Church (Acts 10:1–11:17).

Yet some Jewish Christians claimed, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). In principle, this could have been settled by any of the apostles, and especially by Peter—the first pope—who could have simply reiterated what God revealed to him.

But not everyone listens to the pope, and sometimes it's better to have a joint meeting of the highest Church leaders. When they publicly declare something together, it can't be dismissed by saying, “Oh, that's just *his* view.”

Thus, God gave a revelation directing the Church to hold a council in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:2). The members of the Magisterium reviewed the word of God as it had been revealed in the period leading up to the council, and they confirmed that Gentile Christians didn't need to become Jews. They also worked out a pastoral policy to help Jews and Gentiles live together as Christians (Acts 15:1–32).

They understood that the Holy Spirit was guiding them as they reviewed the facts God had already revealed, and so they wrote that the conclusions the council came to “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). We thus see the Holy Spirit setting a precedent of guiding the Magisterium in its deliberations about the correct interpretation of God's word.

And so, the pattern we see in the apostolic age involved passing on the Christian faith as both Tradition and Scripture, as interpreted by the

Magisterium—the same pattern that the Catholic Church uses today!

3. Knowing God, Eternal Life

When praying to his Father in the presence of the disciples, Jesus declared,

This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).

Here Jesus reveals the intimate connection between knowing God (by his Son, Jesus, who reveals him) and eternal life. There is a sense in which knowing God *is* eternal life. It begins, even today, when we obtain knowledge of God and respond in faith.

Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:6).

To lay hold of eternal life, we need to lay hold of the knowledge God has given us in the Christian faith.

I Believe

To ensure that Christians have a proper understanding of their faith, in the early Church it became customary to have them make a profession of faith upon their baptism—in other words, to say what they believed.

Such a profession is known as a *creed*, from the Latin word *credo* (“I believe”). Scholars have detected traces of early creeds in the New Testament, and many have been developed over the centuries. The most influential is known as the Nicene Creed (see appendix C), and the first version of it was composed at the Council of Nicaea in 325.

God the Son

The council was called after an Egyptian priest named Arius began preaching that Jesus is not God but a created, angelic being. This shocked the faithful, because the New Testament teaches the divinity of Christ:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:1–3, 14).

Jesus testified to his divinity by stressing that he was the Son of God in a unique sense. His critics recognized the implications of what Jesus was saying, and opposed him precisely because he “called God his Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

Contrary to what Arius taught, Jesus could not be a merely angelic being, for as the New Testament says:

To what angel did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”?

Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”?

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him” (Heb. 1:5–6).

To correct the error that Arius was teaching, a council was called in the city of Nicaea. The bishops, as successors of the apostles, followed the pattern set at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). By speaking with one voice, they made it clear Arius’s teachings contradicted the Christian faith. Drawing on biblical evidence and the teachings passed down from the apostles, they composed the first version of the Nicene Creed, which says in part:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.

This makes it clear Jesus is truly God’s Son. He was “born of the Father before all ages”—in an eternal, timeless manner, so there was no time at

which he didn't exist. Since he was "begotten, not made" and "through him all things were made," he is different from every created being.

God the Holy Spirit

The first version of the Nicene Creed was written to correct an error about Jesus and did not go into detail about the Third Person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. But Scripture is clear that the Spirit also is God.

In the ancient world, spirits were recognized as personal beings, not impersonal forces. Whether angels, demons, or human spirits, they had personal qualities like intellect and will, so they could know and choose things. One Spirit was superior to all the others, and Scripture refers to him as "the Holy Spirit" and "the Spirit of God."

He, too, is a person. He knows things, "even the depths of God," for "no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11). He makes choices, such as who will receive which spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:11). And he calls people to ministries in the Church, saying things like, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

But he is no ordinary person. That the Spirit knows "even the depths of God" shows he is omniscient, comprehending the full divine mind, which makes him God. Jesus thus put him on the same level as the other two Persons of the Trinity, telling the disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). This is why Peter could ask one man why he was moved "to lie to the Holy Spirit" and say that in doing so, "You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3–4).

Yet in the late 300s, some became confused, and a heresy began to spread denying that the Holy Spirit is God. The bishops again followed the apostles' example and met to announce the faith of the Church.

In 381, at the First Council of Constantinople, they added a section to the Nicene Creed:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,⁴
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,

who has spoken through the prophets.

This clarified that the Holy Spirit is God, since “with the Father and the Son he is adored and glorified.”

Understanding the Trinity

One reason people became confused about the Trinity—despite the evidence in Scripture—is that the teaching can be hard to understand. This isn’t surprising, since it pertains to the inner life of God, and God is infinitely above us. We would *expect* the truth about God to be surprising and difficult for our finite minds to grasp.

Put simply, the Trinity teaches that there is *one* God who is *three* Persons. This leads some people to reply that if there is one God, he can’t be three Persons. Others make the opposite mistake and conclude that, if there are three Persons, there must be three Gods.

To see why these are misunderstandings of the Trinity, we need to be clear about the difference between a being and a person.

A being is anything that exists. This includes atoms, snowflakes, and stones. It also includes you and me. And it includes God, who—as the Creator—is the ground of all being and is often called the Supreme Being.

Not all beings are persons. Some—like atoms, snowflakes, and rocks—do not have personal qualities. They don’t know things or make choices. But others—like you and me—have these qualities, which is why we’re persons.

Being and *person* are different categories, and they don’t match up in a one-to-one fashion. This is important, because if some beings—like rocks—are *less than one person*, and some beings—like you—are *exactly one person*, then other beings—like God—could be *more than one person*.

The doctrine of the Trinity thus does not contain a contradiction. It may be unexpected, because in our ordinary lives we don’t run into beings that are more than one person. But there is no problem with the concept, and when God, who is infinitely above us, reveals the mystery of his inner life, we should expect surprises like this.

This isn’t something we could have deduced on our own. It is something

God had to reveal to us if we were going to know about it. And he has revealed it, for Scripture clearly testifies that there is one God and that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each Persons who are God.

God Is Love

Scripture tells us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). But love requires an object—something or someone *to* love. Who did God love in timeless eternity, “in the beginning” before he had created anything or anyone? Remember that God didn’t *need* to create the world. It was a free choice on his part, because he was already sufficient in himself.

That gives us the clue we need to figure out who God loved: it was the three timeless Persons of the Trinity. God is an eternal communion of infinite love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

He then created us to share in his overflowing love.

Knowledge, Eternal Life, and Love

As Jesus said, knowledge of God is eternal life (John 17:3). But however much we learn about God in this world, that knowledge will only be partial until we behold God directly, in what theologians call the *beatific vision*:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood (1 Cor. 13:12).

Then we will fully bear the image of God:

Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3).

The last element—purifying ourselves of sin by God’s grace—is important, because it isn’t just intellectual or “head knowledge” about God that counts. What counts is “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Love is what God most wants from us:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love (1 John 4:7–8).

The saving knowledge of God that Jesus declares to be eternal life thus involves love, which is why Paul can say,

If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Cor. 13:2).

As followers of the God who is love, we must practice love ourselves. Jesus revealed that this is the essence of God’s law for our lives: “Love God” and “Love your neighbor” are the two great commandments, on which everything else depends (Matt. 22:36–40; cf. Rom. 13:8–10).

4. Everything Goes Horribly Wrong

God may be perfect, but the world we live in is not. It contains problems and suffering, pain and sin.

Something is wrong with the human race. We all sense it. Things aren’t the way they should be. Not in the world. Not in our neighbors. Not in ourselves.

We aren’t as kind, as generous, or as loving as we should be. We do things we shouldn’t. We are selfish, arrogant, and sometimes even cruel. We use other people for our own ends. We fall short even of our own low standards. The Bible has a word for this: sin.

Sin is a constant of the human condition. It’s all around us. It’s inside us, too. We are all sinners. Sometimes our sins are large, like adultery or murder. Sometimes they are small, like an unkind word or a cutting glance. But they’re always there—at least *today*.

When God first made man, he was able to live and love as he should, free from sin. But our first parents turned away from God.

The account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a

primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man. Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents (CCC 390).

Sin is a violation of the way things should be, a violation of the law of love that God gave us to make us happy. Think of how it would be if everyone lived up to that law and acted lovingly! Unfortunately, we all turn away from God's law.

The Problem of Evil

Throughout history, people have asked why the world contains evil. Scholars refer to this as the *problem of evil*, and they have identified two fundamental types of evil: sin (moral evil) and suffering (physical evil). They have proposed answers to why God allows evil, but in this life the answers can only be partial.

Suffering can actually play a positive role in the world. If we accidentally touch a hot stove and yank back our hand in pain, the pain does something important: it alerts us to the danger we're in and keeps us from injuring ourselves further. Similarly, mental pain—like fear of losing a job or a spouse—motivates us to make changes so we don't lose things that are important to us.

The harder problem is why God allows sin, but here we also have partial answers. If God simply programmed us always to act lovingly, our love would lose something. We might *act* kindly, but we would be like robots—not people who have freely chosen to love.

God wants our love to be a free choice, so he has given us the capacity to choose whether to be loving or not. This means allowing the possibility that we will abuse our free will and choose to be unloving.

Unfortunately, because of the effects of original sin, we have disordered desires that present us with *temptation*. Even when we want to do the right thing, we often find ourselves doing the opposite. As St. Paul says,

I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:21–24).

The answer—which Paul then announces—is that God himself delivers us from sin through Jesus Christ.

The Love of God

God has not abandoned us to sin. He loves us, broken though we are. This is why he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins. He also accompanies us and cares for us throughout all the trials of life.

All three Persons of the Trinity do this. Concerning the Father, Jesus says,

Do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well (Matt. 6:31–33).

Jesus helps us from heaven by interceding on our behalf:

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

And the Holy Spirit helps us, praying alongside us, even when we don’t know what to pray:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8:26–27).

The Weight of Glory

Scripture also reveals that God uses the difficulties of life to produce good. Paul says: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). As the *Catechism* puts it:

Faith gives us the certainty that God would not permit an evil if he did not cause a good to come from that very evil, by ways that we shall fully know only in eternal life (324).

Whether we encounter evil in the form of sin or suffering, God ultimately will bring good out of it. That is the only reason he allows it, and it will not go on forever.

And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3–4).

The joy we have on that day will far exceed the difficulties we encountered in life. Paul states,

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:18).

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:17–18).

No matter what hardships we face, no matter what sin and sorrow we encounter, we know all three Persons of the Trinity accompany us, giving us the care we need in life and bringing good out of the evils we experience, so that we may at last inherit “an eternal weight of glory” that far exceeds anything we have gone through.

True comfort, indeed!

5. The Story of God's Love

When man fell into sin, God didn't abandon him but reached out in love and made salvation possible.

A key moment in this story occurred in the lives of one couple—Abraham and Sarah. Though they were beyond the age of childbearing, God promised them offspring. He showed them mercy, cured their infertility, and gave them the son of promise, whom they named Isaac.

As part of his covenant with Abraham, God promised that a blessing for all the nations of the world would one day come from Abraham's line, telling him, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3; cf. Acts 3:25, Gal. 3:8).

Isaac then became the father of the patriarch Jacob, whose twelve sons founded the twelve tribes of Israel. God's family of promise was growing!

In time, the family traveled to Egypt. At first, they were respected, but eventually they were reduced to slavery.

God Delivers His People

God did not leave his people in this state. He sent the prophet Moses to lead them out of captivity.

When he did so, God instituted the *Passover* celebration, in which the Israelites offered a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts so that disaster would "pass over" their homes (Exod. 12:1–14). This pointed forward to an even greater Passover to come.

God gave laws to the Israelites to make them holy, specially consecrated to him as his "chosen people."

These included the Ten Commandments, which many cultures have considered a model of the proper way to live. How much simpler life would be if people heeded exhortations like, "You shall not kill," "You shall not commit adultery," and "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:13–15, Deut. 5:17–19).

At the center of God's law were the two great commandments:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your

soul, and with all your might (Deut. 6:5).

You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18).

But the Israelites strayed from the path of love, and God treated them as a loving father treats a disobedient son and disciplined them. Sometimes, he used messages through the prophets as verbal warnings. Other times, he allowed them to experience the consequences of their actions, and though they suffered as a result, they also turned back to the path of holiness and love.

The Coming of the Messiah

God gave his people great kings, the most famous of whom was David. And the prophets explained how an even greater king, who would reign forever, would one day be born as the Son of David.

Kings in Israel were anointed with oil, so this figure became known as the *Messiah* (Heb., “Anointed One”). The Greek equivalent is *Christos*, so when the Messiah came, he was known as Jesus Christ. One prophecy about the Messiah was:

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel,” which means, God with us (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14).

Jesus was conceived without a human father and born to a virgin named Mary. This made it clear he was the Son of God. As a divine Person, he was “God with us” in the fullest sense! And, having been born in human form, he was fully human and thus Son of Man. He therefore had three titles: Son of David, Son of God, and Son of Man.

A key part of his ministry was announcing the *gospel* or “good news”:

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14–15).

Jesus announced God’s word in a greater way than Moses and the prophets had done. God had explained as much of his will to the Israelites

as they were able to understand and accept. But since he had only begun working with them, there were things they weren't yet prepared to accept. We noted how some of Moses' regulations were given because of the people's "hardness of heart" (Mark. 10:5). This is why some Old Testament laws can seem strange or harsh to us.

Now that centuries of training in holiness had occurred, Jesus revealed the fullness of God's will and the law of love. It didn't involve a merely human love, in which we are kind to those who are kind to us. Instead, Jesus preached divine love—love for all people, whether saints or sinners.

He called us to love not just our neighbors but also to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matt. 5:44–45).

Jesus performed many miracles that showed his role in God's plan. He "went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Matt. 9:35). But there was an even greater miracle to come.

Jesus Goes to the Cross

In Jesus' day, the Roman Empire was in charge, and many Jews resented it. They yearned for a Messiah who would lead a rebellion, kick the Romans out, and reign as an earthly king.

Jesus had no intention of being that kind of Messiah. He said, "My kingship is not of this world" (John 18:36) and forbade his disciples to use force to defend him (Luke 22:49–51).

Still, the authorities were afraid he would start a rebellion and cause the might of the empire to come down on them.

The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them,

“You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11:47–50).

They plotted Jesus’ death, but the hidden hand of God was at work, and John tells us:

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11:51–52).

God brings good out of evil, and he used the death of his Son to bring about the greatest good in human history—the salvation of mankind.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16–17).

Through Jesus, the blessing that God promised Abraham would finally come to the world. As Jesus said, he came “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28; cf. 1 Tim. 2:6) and make salvation possible.

Just as the Israelites sacrificed the Passover lamb so that destruction might pass them over, Jesus offered himself as the ultimate “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And on the cross, “Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

Modern people often don’t understand the idea of sacrifice, but even we have an impulse to do something good for other people when we have offended them and want to be reconciled. In many cultures, this meant giving the offended person a gift, and so when ancient people offended God, they brought offerings—sacrifices—as gifts. God did not need these (Ps. 50:10), but they served as gestures of repentance and good will.

As our new high priest—the person offering the sacrifice—Jesus offered *himself* for all mankind and made atonement for our sins, not with “the

blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). He did so because he loves us, so each of us can say, “the Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

This is why God allowed the plot against his Son to go forward, and Jesus knew what would happen. As he made his final journey, he prophesied,

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise (Mark 10:33–34).

The Jewish authorities arrested Jesus, but because they could not impose the death penalty (John 18:31), they took him to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. At first, he resisted, but eventually he agreed to have Jesus crucified, and he was taken away and nailed to a cross.

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last (Luke 23:44–46).

Jesus’ followers buried his body in a tomb belonging to one of their number who lived in Jerusalem, a man named Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38–42). But it was sundown and the Sabbath—the Jewish day of rest—was beginning (Luke 23:54), so they weren’t able to complete the burial rites, which included anointing the body with spices. Therefore, they rested on the Sabbath, and returned early Sunday morning.

But there was one part of Jesus’ prophecy that the disciples had forgotten.

Love Is Stronger Than Death

Jesus hadn’t only predicted his death. He also said that “after three days he will rise” (Mark 10:34)—and that day had come!

The first day was the day of the Crucifixion. The second was the Sabbath,

when the disciples rested. And the third was when he rose from the dead, which is why Christians celebrate Sunday, the first day of the week, as a holy day, referring to it as “the Lord’s day” because that’s when the Lord Jesus rose (cf. Matt. 16:2, 1 Cor. 16:2, Rev. 1:10).

God’s love thus triumphed over death, and when the disciples returned to the tomb where they had buried Jesus, they found it empty, and angels announced to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen” (Luke 24:5).

Despite what Jesus had said, this news was shocking! Jews believed that God would one day raise the dead, but they thought it would happen only at the end of time (cf. John 11:23–24). They weren’t expecting anyone to rise before then, which is why they hadn’t understood what Jesus meant when he predicted his own death and resurrection (Mark 9:10, cf. John 20:9).

When they discovered the tomb empty, their first thought was that someone had moved the body (John 20:2, 13). And even when Jesus himself appeared to them, they struggled to explain it in terms they could understand. Since people in their culture believed that the dead could appear to the living (cf. Acts 23:9), their next thought was that they were seeing a ghost.

They were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit.

And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this he showed them his hands and his feet.

And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them (Luke 24:37–43).

No one had taken Jesus’ body away. He wasn’t a ghost. He was really alive again! He “presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God”

(Acts 1:3). Then he told them,

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:8–11).

Jesus thus ascended to heaven, where he reigns as the messianic Son of David the way he intended: not as an earthly king but as a heavenly one. And “he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:25–26).

He will return at the end of the world, when the dead are raised back to life. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:22–23).

The ascension of Christ is thus to be followed by his Second Coming, when “the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16).

The Importance of the Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus is a pivotal event. As St. Paul would later say, God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Christ’s resurrection is proof the Christian faith is true, and we have convincing evidence that it happened.

Whether historians are Christian or not, they agree that the early Christian

message included certain claims about Jesus:

1. He lived.
2. He died on a cross.
3. He rose from the dead.
4. His tomb was found empty.
5. He appeared to them alive.
6. He ascended into heaven.

The question is how to *explain* these claims. The first two—that Jesus lived and then died on a cross—are not controversial among scholars. These are considered as certain as any facts we know about the ancient world. The evidence for them is conclusive.

What about the claim that he rose from the dead? The disciples didn't witness this—it happened in the darkness of Jesus' tomb. But it is supported by the empty tomb and by Jesus' appearances to the disciples. He even let them touch him, and he ate in their presence to prove he was physically alive (Luke 24:39–43; cf. John 20:24–29, 21:9–13). Other than resurrection, what could account for such things?

Could someone have stolen Jesus' body? It would have been hard, since the tomb was guarded (Matt. 27:62–66). But even if someone had managed to do it, it would explain only the empty tomb. It wouldn't explain how Jesus later appeared to his disciples.

Could Jesus have merely lost consciousness on the cross from trauma and later revived? That would have been difficult, because “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). Medical experts understand this “water” as clear fluid that built up in the pleural cavity of the lung, the pericardial sac around the heart, or both. The spear thrust that released it would have been fatal.

Even if Jesus had survived such a devastating wound, how could he—gravely weakened—have gotten out of the tomb, whose entrance was

covered with a stone (Matt. 27:60, Mark 16:4, Luke 24:2, John 20:1)? How could he have gotten past the guards? And how, since his ascension was also a key part of the early Christian message, could he have ascended into heaven in front of the disciples, except by supernatural means?

Could the disciples have hallucinated the resurrection appearances of Jesus and his ascension? Hallucinations of up-close, personal conversations don't happen in groups. And even if they did, that would not explain the empty tomb. After rumors of a resurrected Jesus began to spread, why didn't the Jewish authorities simply go to the tomb and produce the body?

Could Jesus have had a twin brother who either died on the cross in his place or later appeared to the disciples pretending to be him? Only three people in a thousand have identical twins, and even if Jesus had one, he would have been famous and the disciples would have known about him. Of course, this wouldn't explain why the tomb was empty, either. And how could the twin have ascended into heaven in front of the disciples?

Could they have stolen the body and then lied about the resurrection appearances and the ascension? Even if they had gotten past the guards at the tomb—what was their motive? Nobody was expecting a resurrection to occur before the last day, making their hoax hard to sell to a Jewish audience. And the disciples didn't become rich or powerful by preaching Jesus' resurrection. Instead, they experienced a life of persecution and hardship (cf. Acts 5:40, 8:1, 16:22, 2 Cor. 11:23–27).

Once they began suffering for preaching their message, why didn't they simply stop? That's what con men would have done. Yet they persisted, even to the point of death, and many were martyred for their faith (cf. John 21:18–19, Acts 12:1–2, 2 Tim. 4:6–8). Serious scholars, whether they're believing or skeptical, recognize the fundamental sincerity of Jesus' disciples. They were firmly convinced of what they preached.

Every proposed alternative to the resurrection suffers fatal problems (only some of which we've covered here). As a result, it is a powerful proof of the truth of the Christian faith and the role of Jesus in God's plan.

6. God's Growing Family of Love

Jesus told a parable about how great things often have small beginnings:

The kingdom of God . . . is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade (Mark 4:30–32).

God began preparing his kingdom when he took one man—Abraham—and from him built a great nation, the people of Israel. But he had promised that the blessing of Abraham would come to *all* peoples.

This happened in a way many didn't expect. By making the Israelites his chosen people, God gave them a unique role as “a light to the nations” who would bring to those nations knowledge of the Lord (Isa. 42:6). The prophets predicted Gentiles would come to worship God, and—in the age of the Messiah—he would even take some as priests to minister to him (Isa. 66:21).

But many in the Jewish community thought that if you wanted to experience God's blessings you needed to become Jewish as well as Christian (Acts 15:1). This was not God's view, and he made it clear that Gentiles could be baptized into the Church (Acts 10:1–11:18). Consequently, God's family was expanding in a new way: it began to include Gentiles as well as Jews. As St. Paul explains,

He is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal (Rom. 2:28–29).

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants—not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all (Rom. 4:16).

God's original chosen people still have a special place in his plan. “They are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of

God are irrevocable” (Rom. 9:28–29). But now God’s family is no longer confined to a single people, and includes those “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). God’s new people—the Church—thus overlaps with but extends beyond his original people, Israel.

And so, like a mustard seed, God’s kingdom grew from a tiny beginning to become a worldwide body. Today, more than two billion people—a third of all humanity—are Christian.

Jesus Builds His Church

Moses had called the community of Israel together as an assembly in the desert (cf. Acts 7:38), and Jesus began gathering a new assembly of those who believed in him. The Greek word for assembly is *ekklesia*, and in English it is translated “church.” That’s what Jesus’ Church is: the assembly of people who are his disciples.

Any group needs leaders, and so Jesus appointed them. “He called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles” (Luke 6:13). The term *apostle* (Greek, *apostolos*) means a representative or ambassador—someone who is authorized to speak on behalf of someone else—so Jesus’ apostles were authorized to speak on his behalf.

He also selected one apostle as the leader of the others. When he met this man, Jesus gave him a new name: *Cephas*, or Peter—both of which mean “Rock” (John 1:42). This name was prophetic, and Jesus explained its meaning. After Peter declared that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” he responded,

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:17–19).

Each of these three statements is significant. In the first, Jesus declares

Peter blessed and explains why: because the Father has shown him who Jesus truly is.

In the second, Jesus declares Peter the rock on which he will build his Church—explaining the meaning of Peter’s new name and emphasizing his foundational role in the Church. Jesus also prophesies that his Church will never die, for the gates of hades—the place of the dead—will never close over it.

In the third, Jesus gives Peter “the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” In the Old Testament, there was an official who ran the palace on behalf of the king. This official is sometimes called the chamberlain or chief steward, and he had a key to symbolize his authority. At one point, God announced: “I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (Isa. 22:22). Notice how similar this is to Jesus’ third statement to Peter.

Only Jesus isn’t merely an earthly descendent of David. He is the Son of God, so he gives Peter not the key of the house of David but the keys of the kingdom of heaven. As the ultimate Son of David, Jesus appoints Peter as the chamberlain or chief steward of his own house, the Church.

This carries the authority to “bind and loose”—a Jewish expression for making and abolishing rules. Thus, the Jewish historian Josephus says that at one time the Pharisees were so influential that they “became themselves the real administrators of the public affairs; they banished and reduced whom they pleased; they bound and loosed at their pleasure; and, to say all at once, they had the enjoyment of the royal authority.”⁵

And so Peter received the authority to govern Christ’s Church. Jesus later shared this authority with others (Matt. 18:18), but he only gave the keys to Peter—indicating his unique role.

Some have tried to deny Peter this role by arguing that, in his second statement, Jesus actually *contrasted* Peter with the rock on which the Church is built, but this doesn’t fit the context. If you reread the statements that Jesus makes to Peter, you’ll see that each one is a *blessing*, which he then explains. So, “I tell you, you are Peter” also is a blessing, and its meaning is explained by “and on this rock I will build my Church.”

This is not the only passage showing Peter's role as leader of the apostles. When a dispute breaks out about who is the greatest, Jesus responds by making three more statements. First, he tells them that the greatest of them should act like the servant of all (Luke 22:24–27). Second, he assures them they will all have positions of honor in heaven (Luke 22:28–29). And, third, he tells Peter,

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren (Luke 22:31–32).

Jesus thus gives Peter a special pastoral role among the other apostles. He is the one who is to be the servant of all, and thus their leader.

We also see this in John's Gospel. After Peter denied Christ, Jesus confirmed him in office. In the presence of the other disciples, he asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?"—meaning the other disciples. Peter replied, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you," and Jesus told him: "Feed my lambs." This happened three times, corresponding to Peter's three prior denials (John 21:15–17; cf. 18:15–27).

By telling him to feed his sheep, Jesus confirms Peter's role as a spiritual shepherd, and by citing the other disciples who are present, Jesus includes them in the flock that Peter is to guide.

We see that three of the four Gospels—Matthew, Luke, and John—stress Peter's unique role as a leader of Christ's Church.

And notice that it *has* leaders! It isn't an informal group. Christ appointed leaders and invested them with authority to govern. They could even expel an erring member who refused to repent (Matt. 18:17).

By granting this authority to excommunicate, Jesus also revealed that his Church would have a definite, identifiable membership. It wouldn't be an "invisible," spiritual union of all believers. It would have a visible structure, with identifiable leaders, laws, and members.

And since "the gates of hades shall not prevail against it," it will never die, which means this same visible, identifiable Church built on Peter exists today.

The Threefold Ministry

If Christ's Church needed leaders when it was a tiny group, it would need them even more as it grew.

As the Jerusalem church began to expand, the apostles realized the need for additional people to oversee church affairs (Acts 6:1–6), and as churches began springing up in different cities, they also needed leaders. Thus, on the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church” that they had founded (Acts 14:23).

The Greek word for *elder* is *presbuteros*, and it is the origin of the English words *presbyter* and *priest*; so when we read about church elders in the Bible, we are reading about the first generation of Christian priests.

The apostles also appointed another group of Church ministers, known as deacons (from the Greek word *diakonos*, which means “minister” or “servant”). Their job was to assist the priests.

The apostles eventually passed from the scene, and so they turned the task of governing the Church over to a group of men known as bishops (Greek, *episkopoi*, “overseers”). The bishops thus became the successors of the apostles.

Consequently, the apostolic age gave the Church a threefold group of leaders, consisting of bishops, priests, and deacons. These were understood to be essential offices. Around the year A.D. 108, we find the early Christian author Ignatius of Antioch saying,

Let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God's council and as the band of the apostles. Without these no group can be called a church.⁶

The Successor of Peter

As the apostolic age ended, one particular bishop inherited a special leadership role. Jesus determined that the twelve apostles needed a single leader, so he appointed Peter. Now that the Church had dozens of bishops—and later hundreds and thousands of them—the need for a central leader

was even greater!

This leader was the bishop of Rome, whom we refer to today as the *pope*. After Peter was driven from Jerusalem, he went to “another place” to continue his ministry (Acts 12:17), and he eventually settled in Rome.

This was a logical place, because it had a large Jewish population and—as the capital of the empire—it was connected with every point in the Roman world. “All roads lead to Rome,” so it was an outstanding location from which to spread the Christian faith. Yet pagan Rome was wicked and hostile, which is why Peter refers to it using the code word “Babylon” (1 Pet. 5:13).

Paul also evangelized in Rome, and so around A.D. 108 Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Romans, saying, “I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul: they were apostles.”²

Peter was martyred in Rome under the emperor Nero, around A.D. 66, just as Jesus had predicted (John 21:18–19). Consequently, that is where he left his successor. Just as the bishops became successors of the apostles in general, the bishop of Rome became the successor of Peter in particular.

This has important implications. In the apostolic age, you couldn’t be fully in communion with Jesus’ Church without being in communion with its leader, Peter. And in all subsequent ages, you can’t be in full communion with Christ’s Church without being in communion with the successor of Peter.

The Catholic Church Gets Its Name

Unfortunately, not everyone remained in communion. Fallen human nature is prone to forming factions—a problem that has been with the Church since the beginning (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10–13). Sometimes these factions break away from Christ’s Church, revealing an underlying spiritual problem (1 John 2:19).

As schisms and heresies appeared, faithful Christians needed a way to refer to these groups, and so they acquired distinct names. One of these, mentioned in the Bible, was called the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15). Other sects that arose might be named after their founder (the Marcionites were

founded by Marcion), after their distinctive doctrine (the Gnostics claimed to have special *gnosis* or “knowledge”), after a distinctive practice (the Encratites practiced excessive *enkrateia* or “self-control” by refusing marriage and meat eating), or after their place of origin (the Phrygian heresy arose in Phrygia).

This is similar to how more-recent groups have been named after their founders (Lutheranism was founded by Martin Luther), doctrines (Presbyterians hold that churches should be governed by presbyters), practices (Seventh-Day Adventists worship on Saturday, the seventh day), or locations (Anglicanism began in England).

As new sects emerged, the original Church from which they departed needed a name, too. Since this Church was spread over the whole world, it was a universal Church, and so it came to be called *katholikos*, a Greek term for “universal.”

The first surviving reference to the Church using this term is in the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch. Around A.D. 108, he wrote,

Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears let the congregation be present; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.⁸

The fact that Ignatius doesn’t stop to explain this term could indicate it was already familiar, which would place its origin in the late first century. This is how the Catholic Church got its name: to distinguish the universal Church that Christ founded from the local breakaway groups.

The Catholic Church is the continuation of the original Church that Jesus founded. He prophesied that the gates of hades wouldn’t prevail against it, and they haven’t. We know from Scripture that he founded a “visible” Church with identifiable leaders, laws, and members. We also know that it was founded on St. Peter and thus includes a special “Petrine ministry.” When we look for a Church that has all these elements and has existed from the first century to today, there is only one: the Catholic Church.

7. Eternal Life Today

When Jesus brought us the words of eternal life, he promised that we can possess this life even today:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

Eternal life is a *grace*—something we don't deserve and haven't earned, but receive as a gift. The Bible has special terms to describe how God's grace works in our lives:

- *Salvation*—how God rescues us from sin;
- *Redemption*—how Jesus “bought us back” from sin by his death on the cross;
- *Forgiveness*—how God releases us from sins and doesn't hold them against us;
- *Justification*—how he makes us just or righteous in his sight;
- *Sanctification*—how he makes us holy; and
- *Glorification*—how he transforms us so we share in his glory.

Understanding Justification

Some people misunderstand the Church's teaching on one of these graces—justification—and think Catholics believe we must earn our position before God by doing good works. This is not the case.

With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality, for we have received everything from him, our Creator (CCC 2007).

We don't do good works to enter a state of justification. As the Council of Trent says,

None of those things which precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace itself of justification. For, “if it be a grace, then it is no more by works, otherwise,” as the same apostle says, “grace is no more grace” (Rom. 11:6).⁹

Good works *flow from* the state of justification, as we grow in holiness and righteousness by cooperating with grace:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8–9).

Becoming a Christian

Jesus’ message during his ministry was: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). God was preparing to extend his heavenly kingdom among men. The way to become a citizen of the kingdom was by becoming one of Jesus’ followers—a Christian.

As Jesus indicated, this involved repentance—turning away from sin and embracing a life of love. It also involved faith, by believing the good news of what God was doing through his Son. Jesus also taught that his followers should undergo a special rite—baptism—to become disciples. He told the twelve apostles:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matt. 28:19–20).

Sacraments: Making Grace Visible

Baptism is a *sacrament*. It’s a way God communicates his “divine life”—eternal life—to us:

The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and

entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions (CCC 1131).

Jesus gave us the sacraments because we aren't simply spirits. As humans, we have bodies, and we perceive the world through sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. It's logical for God to give us his grace through visible, perceptible means. When we receive the sacraments, God gives us a tangible assurance of grace that doesn't depend on our feelings.

What about those who can't or don't receive the sacraments? Some don't even know about them—are they deprived of grace?

Although God uses the sacraments to give grace, he can do this in other ways (cf. CCC 1257). God knows our hearts. If a person has the love Jesus proclaimed and thus *would* have received the sacraments, given the knowledge and opportunity, God won't refuse that person the grace he needs.

Still, so that there would be tangible, ordinary channels of grace that could be offered to all people, Jesus instituted seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, confession, the anointing of the sick, matrimony, and holy orders.

Baptism: New Life

The Bible describes our receiving eternal life as a “new birth,” “new life,” or “regeneration.” Jesus indicated that this second birth takes place in baptism, through the Holy Spirit:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

St. Peter stresses the importance of baptism for salvation:

Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience (1 Pet. 3:21; cf. Rom. 6:4).

As the rite by which we become Christians, baptism corresponds to the practice of circumcision, by which one became Jewish. The Bible describes it as “the circumcision of Christ”:

You were circumcised with a circumcision not made by hands, by the removal of the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism (Col. 2:11–12).¹⁰

Just as circumcision could be applied both to adult converts and their children, who would be raised in the Jewish faith, so baptism can be applied both to adult converts to Christianity and their children. As Peter told the crowds on Pentecost,

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children (Acts 2:38).

Throughout history, Christians have baptized their children so that they may have God’s grace working in their souls as early as possible.

Confirmation: Strength for Service

Baptism gives us the Holy Spirit and divine life, but we also receive them through other sacraments.

One is confirmation, whose name comes from the fact it helps make us “firm” in the Christian life. It strengthens us to serve God and provides a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It also is called *chrismation*, because of the *chrism* or blessed oil used in the rite, together with the laying-on of hands.

Confirmation must be done by a bishop or priest. Sometimes it is performed at the time of baptism and sometimes afterward.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for the Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name

of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–17).

Here the apostles confirm the Samaritans, resulting in a new and dramatic reception of the Spirit.

Together with baptism and the Eucharist, the laying-on of hands in confirmation is a *sacrament of Christian initiation* and thus among the “elementary doctrines” new converts need instruction in (Heb. 6:1–2).

The Eucharist: Eternal Life Incarnate

Just before he went to the cross, Jesus instituted the Eucharist—a name derived from the Greek word for thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). In this sacrament, a priest takes bread and wine and—by God’s miraculous power—they are transformed into Christ’s body, blood, soul, and divinity, according to the words of Jesus himself. St. Paul explains,

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the chalice, after supper, saying, “This chalice is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:23–25; cf. 10:16).

“This is my body. . . . This is my blood.” Those are bold words, and when Jesus first announced the Eucharist, people found it hard to accept. But Jesus was adamant:

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats

me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever” (John 6:52–58).

Jesus was willing to lose disciples if they did not accept this teaching (John 6:66). He even asked the core disciples, “Will you also go away?” prompting Peter to reply, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:67–69).

The disciples understood that Jesus had the divine power to perform the miracle he proclaimed. So have orthodox Christians down through history. Around A.D. 108, we find St. Ignatius of Antioch warning:

Now note well those who hold heretical opinions about the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us; note how contrary they are to the mind of God. . . . They abstain from the Eucharist and prayer, because they refuse to acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which the Father by his goodness raised up.¹¹

By deliberately rejecting the Eucharist, these individuals failed to heed Jesus’ warning, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Jesus is the source of eternal life (John 14:6). He is eternal life incarnate, and thus the Eucharist is also.

Confession: Eternal Life Regained

Jesus declared, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:17). He told his disciples, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (John 15:10). He also warned, “If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned” (John 15:6). It thus is possible to *lose* eternal life.

God doesn’t expect us to live in sinless perfection, “for we all make many mistakes” (James 3:2). This is why Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matt. 6:12).

Simple prayer suffices to be forgiven for less-serious (what are called *venial*) sins.

But if we commit serious—mortal—sin, the matter is different. Remember the terms on which Jesus preached the good news: “Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Repentance means turning away from sin, so if we knowingly and deliberately commit grave sin, we reject the terms on which eternal life is offered.

Fortunately, it is possible to regain it. This is the point of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). In the parable, a son leaves his father (who represents God) for a life of sin and the father describes him as “dead.” When the son later repents, his father joyously welcomes him back and describes him as “alive” again.

In the same way, a Christian can abandon the Father’s family, be dead in sin, and then return to spiritual life again. God is always ready to welcome us back, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9)—no matter what we have done or how long we have been away.

Jesus provided the way for us to return from mortal sin when he instituted the sacrament of *confession*, telling the disciples,

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21–23).

For Christ’s ministers to know whether to forgive or retain (not forgive) a sin, we need to tell them of the sin and whether we have repented, which is why this sacrament is called “confession.” It also is called “penance” and “reconciliation.”

These names express what happens when we approach a priest for the sacrament: We confess our sins, the priest gives us a penance to express our repentance, and he reconciles us with God by forgiving us through Christ’s authority and the power of the Holy Spirit (see appendix A).

Anointing of the Sick: Life at the Moment of Death

Sometimes, particularly near the moment of death, a person may be so ill he's unable to confess his sins, and God's love doesn't abandon us in these circumstances.

Jesus instructed his ministers to anoint the sick with oil for healing (Mark 6:13). The anointing of the sick is administered by "elders" (presbyters/priests), and, when needed, it brings about the forgiveness of sins:

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven (James 5:14–15).

Whenever a Christian falls gravely ill, it is important that he receive this sacrament. It may not always be God's will that he be physically healed, but God knows how to bring good out of such situations (cf. Gal. 4:13), and the sacrament not only brings forgiveness of sins but also graces to help the sick person deal with his afflictions physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Matrimony: Living Together & New Lives

Marriage is an institution God established (Gen. 2:18). Both the good of the spouses (living together) and offspring (new lives) are important goals in marriage.

The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring (CCC 1601).

Not everyone is called to marriage. Some have a special religious calling and serve as what Jesus called "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12), sacrificing the goods of marriage to serve God. Jesus himself had no human wife. Instead, he was mystically married to his Church, the "bride of Christ" (Rev. 19:7, 21:2, 9).

This mystical union has consequences for Christian marriage. Christ elevated it so that between two baptized persons, it becomes a sacrament (CCC 1617).

For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” [Gen. 2:24]. This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:29–32).

God uses this sacramental union to bring couples into his divine life to help them live as Christian spouses and parents.

Holy Orders: Eternal Life for the World

Christ appointed ministers to preach his good news and share his grace. In the apostolic age, this plan unfolded with the institution of the threefold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons.

Through the laying-on of hands in the sacrament of holy orders, they are empowered to perform their mission. Paul tells his protégé, Timothy,

I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands (2 Tim. 1:6).

Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry (2 Tim. 4:2, 5).

Christ’s ministers must heed these words as they carry out their sacred duties of preaching the gospel and sharing eternal life with the world.

8. Treasure in Heaven

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where

thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt. 6:19–21).

By saying this, Jesus points our eyes to the future and also reveals how we should live in the present. This life is short, but the life that awaits us is neverending.

Life Without Love

If we live selfishly, as people concerned only with our own interests and pleasures, we close ourselves off from loving relationships with others—and with God.

“God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16), and to sever ties with the source of love and goodness can only result in pain and frustration. Yet we have free will, and God respects our choices. He does not force himself on us and lets us choose how we will live.

With death, our life-choice becomes definitive—our life stands before the judge. Our choice, which in the course of an entire life takes on a certain shape, can have a variety of forms. There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love, people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word *hell* (Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 45).

Hell is the “definitive self-exclusion from communion with God” (CCC 1033). Its chief pain is “eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs” (CCC 1035).

Living in Love

Instead of living just for ourselves, we can choose to be loving people and joyously experience fellowship with God and other human beings.

On the other hand, there can be people who are utterly pure, completely permeated by God, and thus fully open to their neighbors—people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey towards God only brings to fulfilment what they already are (*Spe Salvi* 45).

This journey ends in the state we call heaven. “Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (CCC 1024). It is to be brought fully into the divine life of God—the source of all happiness.

Most of us are not ready for heaven, for nothing unclean shall enter there (Rev. 21:27).

For the great majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil—much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul (*Spe Salvi* 46).

People like this need to be purified before they can enter heaven, and the Church gives the name *purgatory* to this final purification (CCC 1031). It is the final stage of *sanctification*—the process by which God makes us holy.

St. Paul speaks of how some “will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15).

Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Savior. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves (*Spe Salvi* 47).

All who experience this transformation enter the full glory of heaven.

Life from Death

Depending on what we choose, one of two final destinies lies before us: heaven or hell. And we shouldn't imagine that these are states where we will exist forever as disembodied ghosts. Just as Jesus was physically raised from the dead, we will be raised with our bodies at his Second Coming:

I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done (Rev. 20:11–13).

For those who accepted God's grace and love, there will be a glorious new life:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:1–4).

This is our ultimate fate: living in heavenly union with God on the new earth, when "the dwelling of God is with men."

Laying Up Treasure

Which destiny we choose is expressed through the many choices we make every day. Each gives us the opportunity to be loving and lay up "treasures in heaven."

Each time we say yes to God's grace, each time we respond to the call of love, we do something he will reward, for,

He will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life (Rom. 2:6–7).

We thus have the opportunity today to lay up eternal rewards that God will give us when we stand before him.

Loving God

Since God has all possible perfections, he has no needs, and thus he does not “need” our worship. However, when we love and worship him, we unite ourselves with the source of all goodness.

Since God is infinitely good, he deserves love without limit. Jesus tells us that the first great commandment is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).

Loving God involves acknowledging the truth about him. Recognizing his worth in this way is what we call “worship,” and so loving God involves worshipping him—by prayer and by “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart” (Eph. 5:19).

This is not just something we do by ourselves, for God does not want us to love him just as individuals. We need to gather together as Christians to worship him as his people and to serve one another in love. This is why Jesus founded his Church, with all its local congregations.

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:24–25).

Loving Neighbor

God loves his creatures, and he expects us to love them, too. Jesus tells us that the second great commandment is, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). As Paul says,

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8–10).

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10).

Being people of love starts with caring for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those closest to us: our spouses, children, and friends.

It also includes helping our fellow Christians: gathering with them to worship, to study God’s word, and to do good in our communities. This takes many concrete forms, from one end of life to the other. For example, Christians work together to provide:

- Prenatal care for unborn children—including pro-life work to protect them from abortion
- Concrete assistance for those who are suffering economic hardship, regardless of age
- Companionship for the hurting, the lonely, and the imprisoned
- Care and comfort for the sick—including those with mental illnesses—and for the dying

It is important that we don’t just stop with material care. To be ultimately happy, people need God, so we also need to lovingly:

- Share the good news of Jesus Christ with them (*evangelization*).
- Help them understand the Faith (*catechesis*).
- Provide evidence and defenses for it (*apologetics*).

Love Beyond Death

When we say the Apostles' Creed, we profess belief in "the communion of saints." This refers to all God's people, whether they are currently alive, being purified in preparation for heaven, or in heaven itself (CCC 946, 954–959).

We continue to love our neighbors by praying for those who have died so that they may experience a smoother transition into heaven (2 Macc. 12:39–45, CCC 1032).

We can ask them to pray for us (CCC 958), along with the angels and saints already in heaven (Rev. 5:8, 8:3–4, CCC 956). This has led to many forms of personal devotion, such as saying the rosary to honor the Blessed Virgin Mary and to reflect on the mysteries of Christ's life.

And we can honor and preserve the memory of the Christians who have gone before us by learning about their lives and imitating their example (1 Cor. 11:1; Heb. 13:7).

In all these ways, we are drawn out of ourselves, becoming more loving people and laying up treasure in heaven.

Conclusion: Choosing Eternal Life Today

Jesus gave us the words of eternal life, and now we have them! The question is, what will we *do* with them?

Will we answer the call of love and embrace the path that leads to eternal life, or will we reject it? As Moses told the Israelites,

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life (Deut. 30:19).

This is something all of us can do, no matter what we have done in the past.

There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive. There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest. Christ who died for all men desires that in his Church the gates of forgiveness should

always be open to anyone who turns away from sin (CCC 982).

Perhaps you're a Catholic who has been away from the practice of your faith for a while. Now is the time to reclaim your precious heritage, resume your walk with God, and experience the love and grace he has to offer you in his Church!

No matter what we've done, God is always willing to forgive us and take us back. If you've ever been a Catholic, all you need to do to resume your walk with God is repent and go to confession. (See appendix A.)

There may be additional issues you also need to deal with (for example, receiving confirmation and the Eucharist, if you haven't already, or rectifying a marital situation). But going to confession is the key step: this will let you be restored to fellowship with God, resume life as a Catholic, and walk in his grace.

If you've never been a Catholic, now is the time! Contact your local Catholic church and learn more about joining the Church that Jesus founded 2,000 years ago! (See appendix B.)

All of us can go deeper with God and grow closer to him. We can learn more about his words—the words of eternal life—by studying Scripture and the *Catechism*.

We can put that word into practice by looking for the many opportunities to love God and our neighbors that constantly present themselves. The good news is that there is no shortage of these! There are so many ways that we can serve as channels of God's love and be loving people—for in doing so we will find true happiness. *And* eternal life.

Let's get started!

Appendix A: How to Go to Confession

If you've been away from the practice of your faith, you can resume active Catholic life by going to confession.

This is a joyful sacrament, by which God welcomes you back just like the father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Jesus has empowered his priests to forgive sins, so you know you *really are* forgiven (John 20:21–23).

You can find out when your local parish has confessions by checking its website or calling the office. You also can make a special appointment with a priest.

Before going, you should make an *examination of conscience* to determine what you need to confess. This should include all the mortal sins you remember committing since your last confession. If you can't remember some, don't worry. God knows what they were and that you're sorry for them. (You also can confess venial sins, but this isn't necessary.)

A mortal sin is committed when you *deliberately* do something with *full knowledge* that it is gravely wrong. (If it wasn't gravely wrong, or if you didn't know at the time that it was gravely wrong, or if you didn't do it deliberately, it's not a mortal sin.)

There are many examinations of conscience online, and these can help you remember sins you may need to confess. Here is a brief one based on the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2–17). Sins that are potentially mortal include:

1. Walking away from God by giving up the Catholic faith;
2. Deliberately misusing God's name;
3. Failing to go to Mass on Sundays or holy days of obligation without a dispensation or an important reason;
4. Gravely disrespecting your parents;
5. Committing murder (including abortion);
6. Having sex with someone you aren't married to (including masturbation or using pornography);
7. Stealing something that caused serious harm to another person;
8. Lying about something that caused serious harm to another person;
9. Deliberately cultivating desires (including sexual ones) for another person's spouse; and

10. Deliberately cultivating desires for another person's property.

You can make your confession anonymously, behind a curtain or screen. In some places, you may be able to make it face-to-face, if you prefer. Don't worry if it's been a long time. The priest will help you if you need it.

- *Beginning:* It's customary to begin by saying, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been [insert amount of time] since my last confession." If you don't know how long, just say, "a long time."
- *Confession:* Then you make your confession. All you need to do is say what mortal sins you committed and how often you committed them. If you don't know, you can estimate (e.g., "once a week"; if necessary, you can even just say, "a lot"). You don't need to explain why you sinned or go into a lot of details. It's enough to simply state the kind of sin and how often it happened. (However, if you'd like further spiritual or emotional counseling, you can call the parish office to set up an appointment.) At the end of your confession, you may say something like, "For these and for all my sins, I am sorry."
- *Contrition:* The priest will ask you to say an act of contrition. Many people have a specific prayer they have memorized, but you can say anything that expresses sorrow for sin, even just "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).
- *Penance:* The priest will give you a penance to do after confession. This is a concrete gesture that helps repair the damage caused by sin, even if only by way of prayer. Be sure to do your penance soon after going to confession, so that you don't forget.
- *Absolution:* After giving you a penance, the priest will absolve (forgive) you by saying a prayer which ends: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." You can respond by saying, "Amen."
- *Conclusion:* Finally, the priest will say something like, "Go in peace," to

which you can respond “Amen” or “Thanks be to God.”

Appendix B: How to Become Catholic

If you’ve never been a Catholic, the way to become one is to contact a church and say you’re interested in becoming Catholic.

The church will have a program known as *RCIA* or the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults to help you. By attending this program, you will gain an understanding of what the Catholic faith teaches, how Catholics worship God, how to receive the sacraments, and how to live the life of love to which God calls us.

To be full members, people need to receive the three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. If you have never been a Christian before, you will receive all three, and they are often administered in a ceremony at the “Easter Vigil” (the night before Easter Sunday).

If you’re already a Christian, you only need to receive the sacraments of initiation you don’t yet have. Most churches have valid baptisms, so you may not need this sacrament. Eastern non-Catholic churches have valid sacraments of confirmation (chrismation) and the Eucharist, so Eastern non-Catholics don’t need them to be repeated to join the Catholic Church. They simply need to be received into it.

Your experience with RCIA may take different forms depending on your background, your life circumstances, and the resources the local church has available.

The key thing is taking the first step by simply contacting the church and saying you’re considering becoming a Catholic. They can guide you from there.

Congratulations, and welcome *home*!

Appendix C: Common Catholic Prayers

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God,the Father almighty,maker of heaven and earth,of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,the Only Begotten Son of God,born of the Father before all ages.God from God, Light from Light,true God from true God,begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven,and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,he suffered death and was buried,and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,who proceeds from the Father and the Son,who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,

Creator of heaven and earth,

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the Virgin Mary,Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;He descended into hell;

on the third day he rose again from the dead;He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,The holy Catholic Church,The communion of

saints,The forgiveness of sins,The resurrection of the body,And life everlasting. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,hallowed be thy name;thy kingdom come,thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.Give us this day our daily bread,and forgive us our trespasses,as we forgive those who trespass against us;and lead us not into temptation,but deliver us from evil.

The Hail Mary

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.Blessed art thou among women And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.Holy Mary, mother of God,Pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.

¹ Mere Christianity (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 3:10.

² “The Proofs for the Existence of God in the Light of Modern Natural Science,” Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Nov. 22, 1951, n. 44.

³ See Jimmy Akin, *The Bible Is a Catholic Book* (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 2019).

⁴ Some versions of the creed add “and the Son” to clarify that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son (CCC 246-248).

⁵ Josephus, *Jewish War* 1:5:2[111] in William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 551–552.

⁶ Ignatius, *Letter to the Trallians* 3:1; in Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

⁷ Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans* 4:3.

⁸ Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 8:1-2.

⁹ Council of Trent, session 6, Decree on Justification, ch. 8.

¹⁰ *The Lexham English Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

¹¹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2.

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